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Important Heritage of Pataliputra

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Abstract: Pataliputra (Modern Patna) ranks amongst early capital cities of India. The ancient city of Pataliputra has maintained a glorious tradition of being a very important centre of political activities in Northern India. Its past had been more glorious. During last hundreds of years it witnessed many political ups and downs and the pages of its history are full with accounts of many interesting events. The city, passing through many critical periods, even today remains to be the capital of one of the states of Indian Union. It was perhaps here that the famous Indian economist and statesman Chanakya or Kautilya wrote his famous "Arthasastra", and the great grammarian Panini composed the sutras of his "Asthadhayi". The excavation conducted at a number of sites in Patna have exposed massive wooden, stone and brick structures belonging to Maurya, Sunga, Kushana and Gupta periods. These include remains of wooden palisade, stone pillared hall, brick walls, drains, stupas and monasteries. These remains are highly significant. Pataliputra is perhaps the only capital city of India from where remains of wooden fortification has come to light. Similarly, it is only site in the plains of Ganga Valley from evidence of the use of stone as building material on large scale has been unearthed. It was also at Pataliputra that the practice of making brick stupas and decorating stupa railings started. Thus, new innovations were made in the field of architecture at Pataliputra.

Keywords: Pataliputra, Kautilya, Arthasastra, Asthadhayi, Megasthenese, Fahien, Hiuen-Tsang, Palibothra, Bulandibagh, Didarganj.

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The ancient city of Pataliputra has maintained a glorious tradition of being a very important centre of political activities in Northern India. Its past had been more glorious. During last hundreds of years it witnessed many political ups and downs and the pages of its history are full with accounts of many interesting events. The city, passing through many critical periods, even today remains to be the capital of one of the states of Indian Union. It was perhaps here that the famous Indian economist and statesman Chanakya or Kautilya wrote his famous "Arthasastra", and the great grammarian Panini composed the sutras of his "Asthadhayi". The famous astrologer-mathematician Aryabhatta belonged to this city and he wrote his famous "Aryabhattiyam" here in 499 A.D. It was here that the tenth Guru of the Sikhs took his birth to guide the Sikhs and the destiny of the nation. Hence in every age the city contributed much to the Indian history and Culture. The origin of the name Pataliputra has been connected with the Patali tree, though this specie of the tree is not found in the vicinity of the city. An unusual presence of a single tree in the locality might have inspired the people to call the place as Pataligrama.

Pataliputra (Modern Patna) ranks amongst early capital cities of India. The excavation conducted at a number of sites in Patna have exposed massive wooden, stone and brick structures belonging to Maurya, Sunga, Kushana and Gupta periods. These include remains of wooden palisade, stone pillared hall, brick walls, drains, stupas and monasteries. These remains are highly significant. Pataliputra is perhaps the only capital city of India from where remains of wooden fortification has come to light. Similarly, it is only site in the plains of Ganga Valley from evidence of the use of stone as building material on large scale has been unearthed. It was also at Pataliputra that the practice of making brick stupas and decorating stupa railings started. Thus, new innovations were made in the field of architecture at Pataliputra.

Ever since the identification of Patna with ancient Pataliputra, several attempts were made to unravel the past glory of the city keeping in minds the account left by Megasthenese, Fa-hien and Hiuen-Tsang. The first systematic excavation made by L.A. Waddell in 1894 followed by D.B. Spooner (1912-13), Manoranjan Ghosh (1926-28), A.S. Altekar and Vijayakant Mishra (1951-55), B.P. Sinha and Lala Aditya Narain (1955-56). In recent times also several explorations and trial diggings have exposed architectural remains, though on limited scale.

The first and foremost architectural evidence discovered from Pataliputra are remains of wooden palisade described by the Greek ambassador Megasthenes to the court of Chandragupta Maurya. He came to Pataliputra in 304 B.C. and gives a detailed account of the city. Megasthenes says that the city (Palibothra) was situated on the confluence of the Sone and the Ganga, was 80 Stadia (9^{1/2} miles) long and 15 Stadia (1^{1/2} miles) wide, its shape was of a parallelogram, the city was surrounded by moat 600ft. wide and 30 cubits deep. He further says that the city was protected by a massive timber palisade with holes in it for archers to shoot arrows, it had 570 watch towers and 64 gates. The Palace of Chandragupta Maurya was situated in the centre of the city, it was made of wood and the pillars supporting the roof of the palace were guilded and adorned in silver and gold.¹

The excavator of Pataliputra tried their best to discover the remains of the timber fortification and their efforts proved rewarding. As far back as 1877 the remains of wooden walls were noticed and first published by the Govt. of Bengal in 1892.² Later on Waddell, Spooner and other fully exposed the remains of wooden fortification wall. Remains of wooden palisade were noticed at Bulandibagh, Sandalpur, Gosain Khanda, Rampur, Pirthipur, Lohanipur, Kankarbagh, Maharaja Khanda, Tulsi Mandi and other places.³ This wooden palisade was probably plastered with mud as the Yuga Purana section of the Gargi-Samhita suggests.⁴ Besides, remains of wooden underground drains, wooden platforms, watch towers and gate were also noticed.⁵ Thus the excavations have confirmed more or less the account of Megasthenes that the city of Pataliputra was surrounded by wooden palisade, having watch-towers and gates. This type of wooden palisade is unique in world architecture and it was purely of Indian nature. It does not reflect any foreign influence – either contemporary, Iranian or Greek.⁶

However, the archaeologists have not succeeded as yet in tracing the remains of the royal palace as described by Megasthenes. Waddell was of opinion that Kumrahar represents the site of old Royal palace.⁷ Similar views were expressed by Spooner also⁸ but the excavations of 1951-56 at Kumrahar suggest that the pillared hall was an isolated structure and had nothing to do with the royal complex. However, it has been suggested that the Pillared Hall at Kumrahar was probably designed and built by Chandragupta. There may have been built a palace to match it.....⁹ This view does not seem to be convincing as the pillared hall was constructed in time of Asoka and no remains of wooden structure, prior to the construction of the stone hall has come to light. On the other hand it seems more probable that the plan of the stone pillared hall may have been drawn upon the hypostyle halls of Chandragupta's palace built mostly of wood.¹⁰ Moreover the Kumrahar complex is situated on the outskirts of the city

which does not corroborate Megasthenes's account that the Royal Palace of Chandragupta was in the centre of the city. The Mudrarakshasa refer to the palace of Chandragupta Maurya as Suganga,¹¹ suggesting thereby this it was situated on the bank of Ganga. The Chinese pilgrim Fa-hein also suggests that the royal palace was situated in the "midst of the city."¹² These references my help us in locating the royal palace. The site of Kumrahar was close to river Sone not Ganga. Ganga flows in the north-eastern part of the city. Hence, the royal palace has to be located into the eastern part of the city, close to the bank of Ganga. It might have been situated east of Bhikhana Pahari, more particularly between Shahpur Kamal Road and Didarganj.

Another important question to be considered here is regarding the builder of the wooden palisade and wooden Royal Palace. It is generally supposed that there were built in the time of Chandragupta Maurya. Megasthenes, however only describes the palisade and the palace and no-where says that it was built by Chandragupta Maurya. It is a well known fact that it was Ajatasatru who started the construction of a fort at Pataligrama to wage war against the Lichchavis of Vaishali. While constructing the fort fortification of Pataligrama also might have been made. This fortification was further strengthened in the time of Udayi who shifted the capital from Rajgir to Pataliputra. He also might have got constructed a palace for himself. This fortification might have been further strengthened and palace enlarged under the rulers of the Nanda dynasty. With the conquest of Pataliputra and establishment of the Mauryan rule, Chandragupta naturally became the master of the city. The earlier palisade and palace might have continued in the time of Chandragupta as well necessary addition and alterations. The fortification continued in the king Ashoka and in the later periods also but Ashoka probably got built a new palace of stone without destroying the old one. This stone palace and the hall was so magnificent that Fa-hien observed that these were the works of spirits and no human hands could accomplish it.¹³

The most significant discovery at Kumrahar was the remains of a massive monolithic Pillared Hall. Spooner was the first to locate this Hall. He noted that the pillars were polished, made of Chunar sandstone having 3'6" diameter at the base and their height being not less than 20'. The number of the pillar was 72. The pillar were placed on a wooden platform. The superstructure of the hall was made of timber. Close to the hall seven wooden platform, measuring 30' long, 5'4" broad, 4'6" high were discovered. Spooner believed that there were a group of buildings by the side of the hall and the entire area was enclosed by a boundary wall. He was very much impressed by the structure and suggested that the pillared hall was designed on the model of Iranian Pillared hall at Persipolis, that Iranian refugee craftsman erected it and served the purpose of the "Audience hall" or the "Throne room" of the Mauryas. This hall was destroyed by fire and due to sinkage of the stone columns.¹⁴

The excavations conducted by the K. P. Jayaswal Research Institute, Patna; under the supervision of Dr. A.S. Altekar and Vijaykant Mishra at Kumrahar significantly modified our knowledge about the Pillared Hall. During this excavation eight more pillar of the Hall proper and four pillars belonging to entrance gate were noticed. Thus the total number of pillars rose to 84. The height of the pillars was determined to be 32.5' No remains of boundary wall encompassing the Hall was found. No buildings of either residential or administrative character were found around or in the vicinity of the Pillared Hall. On the other hand, remains of several monastic structures were noticed from the site belonging to c. 150 B.C. to 600 A.D, the most significant being the Arogya-vihara monastery of the Gupta period. To the south of the Hall appear to be an open pavilion. This Hall was destroyed due to large scale fire in the Sunga period.¹⁵ It might have been burnt by the Yavana (Greek) invaders of the city mentioned in the *Gargisamhita*. To the south of the Hall existence of a canal connected with river Sone and Ganga were noticed. The canal was 43 feet broad and 10 feet deep and might have been used for transporting huge monoliths from Chunar Quarries to the construction site of the Hall.¹⁶ Altekar also opined that the

wooden platform discovered by Spooner supported a wooden staircase of 30 steps, each step being 24 ft. long and 6 inches high. The staircase was used by the distinguished visitors coming to the Hall.¹⁷

As far as the purpose of the construction of this Hall is concerned several views have been expressed. It appears from Altekar's report that the Hall was used by distinguished persons¹⁸ probably visitors to the royal court. In that case it may not be out of palace to suggest that the Hall functioned as a Royal Guest house. Spooner took the Hall to be "Audience Hall" and "throne-room" of the Mauryas¹⁹ S.P. Gupta took the Hall to be a *Ramayamandapa* or *baradari*²⁰ B. P. Sinha suggests that it was constructed to hold the 3rd Buddhist Council at Pataliputra in the region of Ashoka.²¹ The exact purpose of the construction of such a massive structure is still shrouded in mystery and deserves further investigation.

Apart from wooden fortification, Stone-pillared Hall the excavations have exposed other architectural remains also from Pataliputra. Remains of brick built structures, stupas and monasteries were exposed during excavations. Of all the brick structures discovered from Pataliputra those belonging to period c.150 B.C. to 300 A.D. are most impressive. Large brick walls, some of them being as long as 79 and 104 feet, several concrete floors, brick built covered drain measuring 34 feet long and 8 inches deep with provision for its regular clearing, remains of bathroom, kitchen, verandah and brick columns were exposed.²² As compare to this phase structures belonging to C. 300-450 A.D. and onwards were of fragmentary and dilapidated nature.²³ These evidence suggest that Pataliputra was a prosperous city under the Mauryas, Sungas and Kushanas but decline started During Gupta and post-Gupta times.

On the basis of the Chinese accounts of Fa-hein and Huan-Tsang efforts were made by the archaeologists to the locate several stupas and monasteries mentioned by them. Ashoka is said to have got built 84,000 stupas all over India on the sacred Relics of the Lord Buddha. Such Relic Stupa have been identified with Choti-Pahadi and Badi-Pahadi areas of modern Patna. The Relic Stupa was excavated by Waddell and later by Spooner. Spooner's excavations showed that the stupa was built on the high plinth and had an *aradhana* dome. The core of the stupa was formed of mud bricks, later replaced by kiln-burnt bricks. B. P. Sinha Suggests that Pataliputra Relic Stupa might have served as a model for the construction of the stupas of Sanchi and Amaravati and that it marks a great advance over the mud-stupa of Vaishali.²⁴ the discovery of two railings of stone from nearby areas of Kumrahar by Waddell²⁵ may be taken to suggest that sacred Buddhist spot like the Relic stupa and the Foot-Print stone of the Buddha placed in a Vihara close to the Relic Stupa were protected by railings. The Railings have relief sculptures of not well advanced quality. Thus at Pataliputra we noticed the earliest practice of making stone Railings and decorating relief work noticed at Bodh-Gaya, Sanchi or Bharhut followed then.²⁶ These are definitely earlier than the developed form of Railing of Sunga Period.

Another architectural remains discovered from Kumrahar was an apsidal structure, perhaps a brick *Chaitya* with a brick stupa in its centre. It measured 27'9" in length2'2" to 2'6" in breadth. Remains of another apsidal brick *Chaitya* were also noticed.²⁷ they belonged to the Sunga-Kushana period. Thus at Pataliputra we have the earliest example of the construction of brick apsidal *Chaitya* also.

Remains of several monasteries or Viharas were also noticed during course of excavation. Both Fa-hien and Hiuen-Tsang refer to Kumara Vihara, built by Ashoka for his Son Mahendra. Of the Monasteries discovered at Pataliputra remains of two Kushana monasteries and the Arogya-Vihara monasteries were noticed at Kumrahar. The usual pattern of the monastery consisted of a central courtyard and rooms on three sides with *verandah*. The peculiar design of Monastery consisted of 14 small cells and four narrow but longish halls in their front. The remains of open *verandah* in front of halls, were noticed. Flight of steps were provided at six places to approach the *Verandah*.

The monastery had brick concrete foundation. The plan of this monastery is unique. Such Monastic complex has not come to light from elsewhere.²⁸

The remains of Arogya-Vihara Monastery were discovered south-west of the Pillared Hall. Though the complete plan of the monastery is not available but rooms of varying dimensions were exposed here. One of the rooms measured 21'6" x 10' and probably served as the prayer, dinning hall or for accommodating hospital beds.²⁹ It is interesting to note in this connection that a clay seal with the legend "*Sri-arogyavihare bhikshusamghasya*," a potsherd with the legend "(A) *rogyavihare*" and another with the inscription "(Dha) *nvantareh*" were found in the debris of the monastic complex.³⁰ As the very name "*Arogyavihara*" suggests, it also functioned as a hospital about which Fa-hien mentions.

The above discussion gives some idea about the rich architectural heritage of Pataliputra. As mentioned earlier, Pataliputra has many distinctions in the field of architecture. However, several questions connected with architecture of Pataliputra yet remain to be answered convincingly. For example, we cannot say definitely when the wooden fortification and the Royal Palace of Pataliputra was constructed. We cannot do not know from where *Sal* logs were brought into the city in such large numbers to construct the fortification wall and the wooden Royal Palace. The where about the timber palace of Chandragupta Maurya is still shrouded in mystery. The exact nature of the pillared Hall at Kumrahar also deserves fresh consideration to these points so that we may have better information about the glorious past of Pataliputra.

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PLATES



Replica of 80 Pillered Hall, Kumhrar (Patna)

Fig. 1



Mauryan ruins of pillared hall at Kumrahar site of Pataliputra



Kumhrar Maurya level southern wooden platforms

Fig. 3



Ruins of Arogya-Vihar, Kumhrar, Patna

Fig. 4